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AUTHOR Parkay, Forrest W.
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ABSTRACT

To create the conditions necessary for students to learn basic skills, teachers should facilitate interpersonal situations that will encourage learning. Teachers should operate less on a defensive basis and allow more student-teacher involvement, careful thinking, and demonstrated relevance of knowledge to create a dynamic learning environment. Teachers must accept the risk of initiating discussions on controversial subjects. After an acceptant, supportive classroom environment has been achieved, personal and group goals are considered so that class activities can be shaped in a familiar context. While lists of student goals and interests can give a certain amount of impetus to instruction, if the teacher is unwilling or afraid to listen carefully to students, student interest and commitment will not be sustained. By using insights drawn from continuous feedback, a sensitive teacher is able to be increasingly effective in providing students with a relevant learning experience. (PG)

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A PERSON-CENTERED, INQUIRY ORIENTED APPROACH TO TEACHING BASIC SKILLS

Forrest W. Parkay, Ph.D.
Southwest Texas State University

As newspaper, magazine, television, and radio reports continuously remind us, educators today face a tremendous challenge in teaching the basic skills to all their students. The problem is of such magnitude that a 1978 U.S. Senate Committee Report has asserted that ". . . the problem of improving basic skills achievement is a critical one facing American education . . . ." The literacy rate in the United States has dropped alarmingly over the years, and educators and businessmen alike report a general decline in both communication and computation skills. In general, a widespread lack of basic skills needed to cope with life in our complex society has become evident.

In response to this multifaceted problem, the educational establishment must generate and support models of teaching which not only fulfill the short-range goal of increasing student achievement in the basic skills but also the long-range goal of demonstrating to students how continuous, life-long learning can enable them to live a more satisfying life.

As a result of my own public school teaching, I have developed a person-centered, inquiry-oriented model of teaching which, I feel, creates the conditions necessary for students to learn the basic skills and to learn how these skills can enhance the quality of their lives. The model of teaching I present here does not provide a step-by-step sequence for the teacher to follow; it is, instead, a set of considerations which the teacher must reflect on as he makes decisions regarding his own teaching behavior. This strategy suggests for the teacher both a way of being in the classrooom and a framework through which to interpret the ex-

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perience of teaching. It is not a model of teaching for the timid or fainthearted; it requires that the teacher experience the risk of establishing genuine relationships with students whose culture may conflict with his own and of becoming involved in the education of whole persons. The model views teaching as the facilitation of interpersonal situations that facilitate learning.

ORIENTATION OF THE MODEL

Defensiveness vs. Understanding

It is safe to say that many teachers--working daily in situations characterized by lack of student achievement in basic skills, widespread apathy, and occasional acting out of destructive, anti-social impulses--may find themselves in conflict with the dominant cultural values of their students. Any teaching strategy, then, must help the teacher reconcile his personal and educational values with the conflicting reality of his students' life styles. Such a strategy must allow the teacher a certain measure of success and subsequent feelings of professional effectiveness. Unfortunately, the model of teaching which emerges most effortlessly in response to this need is one based on defensiveness, an approach to teaching which "protects" the teacher by encouraging him to project only negative characteristics onto students. Such a model, of course, greatly limits the possibility that students learn and grow.

There is, however, another basis on which to formulate a model for basic skills instruction, a basis that is apt to prove more educative and growth-promoting for the students--and, for the teacher. Through applying a model of teaching which emphasizes an understanding of the complex dynamics of the educative process, I feel I have been able to increase the educative moments in my classroom. This understanding is both intuitive and rational; what I do in the classroom is determined

by what I feel intuitively will "work" and by the more thoughtful, detailed knowledge I have about my students. Furthermore, the understanding that guides my teaching is dynamic, not static. As I have never felt that I have the understanding of the teaching-learning process, my model of teaching has a protean, adaptive quality to it. In essence, my model involves the ongoing process of interpreting and re-evaluating my role as teacher; or, more accurately perhaps, the model is itself an educative, reflective inquiry into the educative process.

Involvement, Thinking, and Relevance

Central to my model of teaching is the belief that the effective teacher, whatever his strategy at the moment, creates in the classroom three conditions designed to facilitate learning. First, he establishes relationships, becomes involved with his students. He forgoes the impulse to be punitive, defensive, or critical and instead tries to make contact with his students in positive, supportive, and growth-promoting ways. Second, he encourages, even prods, his students to think thoughtfully--and he, too, demonstrates for students what it means to think clearly and carefully on any subject. Finally, he demonstrates to students how thinking and acquisition of knowledge are relevant to their lives and can be used to understand and to expand the boundaries of their world.

GOALS OF THE MODEL

Group Goals

My model of teaching has as one of its major goals the creation of a classroom environment characterized by a cohesive group oriented toward listening and thinking and, hopefully, toward inquiry into mutually agreed upon problems or questions. Such an environment, however, is not easily realized in many classrooms where students tend either to withdraw com-

pletely from the group or to join one of several very strong, competitive subgroups which engage in almost ceaseless interpersonal talk. By withdrawing or by supporting each other in small groups, students are able to discount the teacher and avoid some of the anxiety brought on by years of below-average achievement in the basic skills.

In spite of students' tendencies to resist instruction in this way, I have found that I can encourage the gradual emergence of group cohesiveness if I truly listen to what my students are saying and indicate my willingness to participate in an honest student-teacher dialogue which, while it may not be immediately related to the basic skills, is in some way educative. Once we have established this relationship, then we can turn to the task of mastering the basic skills.

Individual Goals

For each student, my model of teaching attempts to provide a warm, understanding, and supportive learning environment. In a word, I wish each student to feel good about what happens to him in my class, and I wish him to feel that he is successful. Many students have accumulated so many years of below-average achievement or failure in basic skills that they seriously doubt their ability to succeed; (I have had students with passing grades ask me if they are failing, so strong are their expectations for failure!) Therefore, I try to find on what terms, with what materials, and with what methods students can learn successfully. I see no virtue in adhering to a board of education curriculum if it succeeds only in making frustrated students flee learning.

What, then, do I wish my students to learn? Using their experiences as a point of departure, I wish my students to:

learn how the basic skills can enhance and enrich the quality of their lives

learn how to learn and come to have some notion of what it means to be educated

learn to judge the implications of their behavior and to be responsible for their actions

learn to inquire into the world beyond their immediate environment

learn how we each develop through confronting and interpreting the meaning of our experiences.

Moreover, I try, through "confrontations" which reflect on our progress as a group involved in leaning, to get individual students to accept the responsibility for making our classes worthwhile and educative.

Before I describe further the activities which typify the person-centered, inquiry-oriented model of teaching, I will address what some may feel is the model's apparent neglect of how to present specific subject matter content. The phases of activity that my model prescribes for the teacher are meant to occur withing the context of a more or less "traditional" approach to teaching. I do, of course, give assignments and tests, and I do teach skills, facts, and concepts. While learning a subject matter discipline per se is the activity which legitimates any class meeting, and additional concern ought to be with the broader educative goals I have previously described. For many students these goals have to be at least partially attained before specific subject matter content can be learned adequately. I suspect, too, that if these larger goals are sufficiently met, it then makes little difference the subsequent strategy through which a specific discipline is presented.

My model of teaching is "activated" through two phases of teacher behavior: (1) the establishment of relationships with students and the creation of an acceptant, supportive cli ate, and (2) the nurturing, or shaping of personal and/or group goals which are educative.

Educative Relationships And an Acceptant Climate

With a new group of students, my initial emphasis is on building and supporting student-teacher relationships which I intuitively feel are educative and growth-promoting. I wish to create a climate that conveys to my students my acceptance of them as they are and encourages a vision of what they might become through continued learning.

Realness

As I teach, I try to move from the formal rigidity and distance characteristic of many teachers toward informal spontaneity and realness with my students. Realness, as Rogers (1969,p.106) points out, is a quality which facilitates learning:

> "When the facilitator is a real person, being what he is, entering into a relationship with the learner without presenting a front or a facade, he is much more likely to be effective . . . Thus, he is a person to his students, not a faceless embodiment of a curricular requirement nor a sterile tube through which knowledge is passed from one generation to the next."

This informality and nondefensiveness leads to a greater appreciation of my students and to a wider range of emotional reactions which I reveal in the classroom. Because I do not deny my appropriate feelings of anger, humor, and even boredom when in class, I am less apt to deny

my students their right to be human too.

Acceptance, Respect, and Trust

Another quality which I feel facilitates learning the basic skills I have susumed under a cluster of terms: acceptance, respect, and trust. Though I have clear standards for student behavior and performance, I accept, respect, and trust all my students, even those who are unable to meet my standards. It is important that a teacher be able to check his natural impulse to further the teacher-student battle and convey instead an unconditional acceptance of students and help them see that cooperation and mutual respect bring their own rewards. My acceptance of students does not mean that I am weak or permissive--I begin with respect while making it clear that the same is expected in return. My students, I am sure, can tell the difference between a destructive, undisciplined permissiveness and firm discipline that nevertheless reveals a caring for and acceptance of the learner.

Empathy and Understanding

One of my major concerns while in the classroom is to empathize with and to understand my students' perceptions of their school experiences. Here, too, Rogers (1974, p.107) suggests that the empathic teacher can encourage learning and growth:

> "When there is a sensitive empathy, however, the reaction in the learner follows something of this pattern, 'At last someone understands how it feels and seems to be me without wanting to analyze or judge me. Now I can blossom and grow and learn.'"

Through non-judgemental understanding of my students' position (though I later give my position,too), I feel I can lessen the hostility many

students feel toward teachers and school. While I do not quite agree with my students' explanations of why school is boring or irrelevant to their lives or why teachers are mean or lazy, my listening to them and understanding them does pave the way for new insights and attitudes.

Promoting Personal and Group Goals

One way I promote personal or group goals in my classes is by giving students the opportunity to identify what is important to them and then trying to shape our activities in terms of these goals. Dewey (1938, p.85) puts quite well the way a teacher can begin this cooperative educative inquiry:

> "The way is, first, for the teacher to be intelligently aware of the capacities, needs, and past experiences of those under instruction, and secondly, to allow the suggestion made to develop into a plan and project by means of the further suggestions contributed and organized into a whole by the members of the group. The plan, in other words, is a co-operative enterprise, not a dictation."

Not only are mutually agreed upon projects more meaningful for students, but they also learn that their input can make a difference in class activities.

I recall, for example, one English class which I taught at an all-black high school. When asked "What is worth learning?" the class generated the following list:

1. Black plays.
2. Drugs and their effect.
3. Colleges and tests.
4. This class.

5. How far can black men go in politics? Can there be a black president? Which blacks are qualified?
6. Dope, sex, pimping, and conning.
7. What is happening in the black neighborhoods, and where do they get their language?
8. Racism--its causes and ways to remove it from society.

Based on their concerns, we had several interesting discussions, and several English assignments I was able to relate to these interests.

While lists of goals are easily compiled, willingness to act on these goals is not always assured. Because many students are deficient in basic skills as well as the attitudes and experiences needed to sustain inquiry, identified interests are often discouragingly short lived--usually enough to sustain only one or two class discussions and very little inquiry. However, even disinterest can be approached in an educative way. By using Glasser's Classroom Meeting Model (1969), I have been able to deal openly and honestly with the way students see and respond to the content of my classes. Classroom meetings also allow me and my students to exchange thoughts and feelings on a variety of subjects. I have held problem-solving meetings on student participation in school vandalism and violence, police brutality, gun control, inappropriate behavior or acting out in class, and ways to make our classes more educative.

Another way to further personal and group inquiry is for the teacher to be alert to what the students themselves are doing, what they are talking about, and what they are reading. If a teacher is willing to listen carefully to students and take note of those instances during which he intuitively feels genuine personal inquiry is taking place, he is better able to provide the kind of education students can become in-

volved in. In my classes, some of the most fruitful discussions, ones characterized by listening and thinking, have occurred when I allowed the topics of interest to emerge from the group. These discussions have covered a wide range of subjects: dreams, love and marriage, racism, abortion, and education. I do not stifle these expressions of opinion, but instead try to demonstrate how a knowledge of basic skills can further students' understanding of these areas.

Classroom Implementation of the Model: An Example

I recall an English class of remedial readers who wanted to explore the nature and causes of prejudice. Perhaps, I thought, this interest could spark some desire to read. At our next meeting, then, I began by confronting students with a film that I thought spoke rather frankly about different types of prejudice--racial, religious, economic, and so on. Following the film, we had a discussion in which my students, all of whom were black, began hesitantly to reveal some of their deeper concerns regarding prejudice. In the spirit of genuine interest and concern, a few students began to ask me direct, perhaps outlandish, questions:

> What would you do if you married a white woman and later later found out she was prejudiced against blacks?
> What did you think when you first saw a black person?
> Would you marry a black woman?
> If two planes, one carrying twenty white women, the other twenty black women, were going to crash and you could save only one plane, which one would you save?
> Do you have any friends who are prejudiced against blacks?

What do your friends say about blacks when all of you get together to play bridge?

The discussion, which could have stayed on a "safe" conceptual level, soon became very real and involving for us all. Eventually, we decided to continue our investigation by reading James Baldwin's The Fire Next Time and Richard Wright's Black Boy. Had we read these books without at least confronting some very real concerns on the part of the students, I am afraid our work would have been superficial, if not hypocritical.

Many teachers would choose to ignore the above issues, content to say that such concerns are not in the curriculum and that teachers are not social workers or psychologists. Teachers who have such feelings are probably better off ignoring these rather threatening, risky issues--but in doing so they lose student energy that could be channeled into learning.

CONCLUSION

As no strategy for teaching basic skills could tell the teacher in advance how to be effective in all situations, I will propose here a broader stance toward the problem. The person-centered, inquiry-oriented approach offers not so much a set of specific procedures to guide instruction as it seeks to nurture an inquiring habit of mind which will enable the teacher to make his own spontaneous, appropriate professional decisions in any situation. Via this methodology, then, the teacher engages in instructional theorizing; he formulates hypotheses for teaching which he tests and modifies in view of a sensitive understanding of himself and his students. Through insights drawn from continuous feedback

and reflection, the teacher is able to grow toward increased effectiveness in providing his students with educative experiences. This "experimental" approach to methodology Brunner (1967, p.70) details in the following:

> "As the curriculum is being built, it must be tested in detail by close observational and experimental methods to assess not simply whether children are 'achieving' but rather what they are making of the material and how they are organizing it. It is on the basis of 'testing as you go' that revision is made."

The person-centered, inquiry-oriented approach to teaching basic skills may appear to some to offer little help to the classroom teacher who wants to know what to do. However, the method does imply what the teacher can do--and that is to ask what resources do I have to understand better my situation and the needs and purposes of my students? Once the teacher makes a strong commitment to an internal dialectic of this sort, he is able to generate his own intelligent understandings to guide present action. A model for teaching can do no more.

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